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# Restless

Ion Yamazaki

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# RESTLESS

by

ION YAMAZAKI

Under the Direction of Ruth Ann Stanford, MFA

## ABSTRACT

*Restless* examines my current artistic practice formally and conceptually, and it also analyzes pathways that led to my thesis exhibition of the same name. This paper consists of descriptions of my previous works, conceptual exploration of my current practice, and descriptions of my current works. My intention of my current practice is to explore temporal yet ever-changing human activities that are full of momentary excitement in the futile nature of capitalistic society.

INDEX WORDS: Success, Failure, Life, Excitement, Futility, Capitalism



RESTLESS

by

ION YAMAZAKI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015  
RESTLESS

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Georgia State University

May 2015

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, Shizuko Yamazaki

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would like to say thank you to everyone who supported my artistic practice throughout my study and gave me critical insights. I especially want to thank my committee members, Kimberly Cleveland, Mike Wsol, and Ruth Ann Stanford for your comments, guidance, and criticisms.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

*“The transcendentality of aesthetics is universal because it is shared by the community through the judgment of taste.”---Keti Chukhrov<sup>1</sup>*

My intention with my artmaking is to be communicable to a wide range of audiences yet to have conceptual depth. I present the audience and participant my concepts that are understandable not by an instantaneous look, but by careful observation of the information presented. So, how do I make artworks that can provide opportunities for a variety of people so that they can decode some of the messages that are hidden in the layers of information? How do I make the audience engaged in my works and initiate their contemplation? It is impossible to ask every viewer to appreciate a work of art equally because everyone does not have exactly the same taste; western philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries such as Hume and Kant argued that our judgments of taste are universal without considering tastes of non-westerners. However, I believe it is becoming possible to provide the viewer a certain level of understanding in the capitalistic society we live in. Everything is commodified, globalized, and standardized through the media, the Internet, and huge franchises, and more and more people have started to share similar knowledge on widespread images and objects.

With this current trend of society in mind, I use everyday materials that are widely available in huge franchises such as Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Target, Amazon.com, etc., to have a direct connection to our consumer culture in the capitalistic structure. In my current practice, I also incorporate interactive performance and installation to let the audience participate physically so that I can provide my viewer instant entry points into my work. By incorporating everyday

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<sup>1</sup> Keti Chukhrov, “On the False Democracy of Contemporary Art,” *e-flux* 57, (2014), accessed December 14, 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-the-false-democracy-of-contemporary-art/>.



materials and audience participation, I create an unfamiliar situation in the gallery space that gives the viewer an opportunity for contemplation and, eventually, an opportunity for inserting his own criticality.

My conceptual focus is to represent momentary excitement in the futile nature of the capitalistic society. Living in a capitalistic society is full of futility since everything seems to be globalized, standardized and commodified, and nothing seems to be real. However, no matter how small, peripheral, or fake the moment of excitement is, the experience of momentary excitement always exists in the futile capitalistic structure we are a part of. For instance, when you see a random five-dollar bill lying on the ground, you might get a little excited even though the bill will be spent on your lunch right away. You think studying calculus is ridiculous since you know you are not going to use it for the rest of your life. But you are studying it anyway because that is what other people tell you to do and it also feels good to get a good grade. Although those events are different situations, they describe the coexistence of excitement and futility in our everyday life.

We experience both excitement and futility on a daily basis, and this binary is a product of another binary: success and failure. I see at least one element of failure in any kind of success, and vice versa. Achievements contain points to be improved, and we can learn a lot from our mistakes. My work reveals the conditionality of success and failure in order to clarify the quality of human experiences; but what can we gain from the process? Apparently the magnitude of experiencing success and failure does not alter the continuous experience of the duality, and all sorts of our experiences seem to exist in order to maintain the balance between the two opposites. Consequently, my work explores my perpetual search for unattainable measurements of success and failure that evoke our balancing act of excitement and futility in capitalism.

## 2 ON PREVIOUS WORKS

Even though my work has changed over the years, it is worth mentioning some of my previous works here because of their formal and conceptual connections to my current practice. Although I had been trying to expand my artistic practice by experimenting with different medias and ideas, my focus has been the repetition of relatively simple gestures by using the body to express repetitions in our physiological systems and societal structures.

*Mundane Affair* (Fig. 2.1) focused on my grandmother's dementia. In this work, I retell stories about my grandmother's younger days that she used to tell me repeatedly when I was in Japan before coming to the United States. I pick three different stories from my memory and write one of them down on a blackboard with water. Then, I sit behind a kitchen table in front of the blackboard until the story disappears. I write another story or repeat the same story with the same procedure. This is an endurance performance that usually lasts for four to five hours straight making my body exhausted and my cognitive skills weak by focusing on executing the repetitive process for so long. Even though this work derives from my personal memory of my grandmother and her progressing dementia, it also suggests a generic experience with an older individual who suffers from a similar disease and loses his memory day by day. This reenactment of my grandmother's repetitive gesture is to share the intimacy I have had with her and my attempt to understand her fading memory.

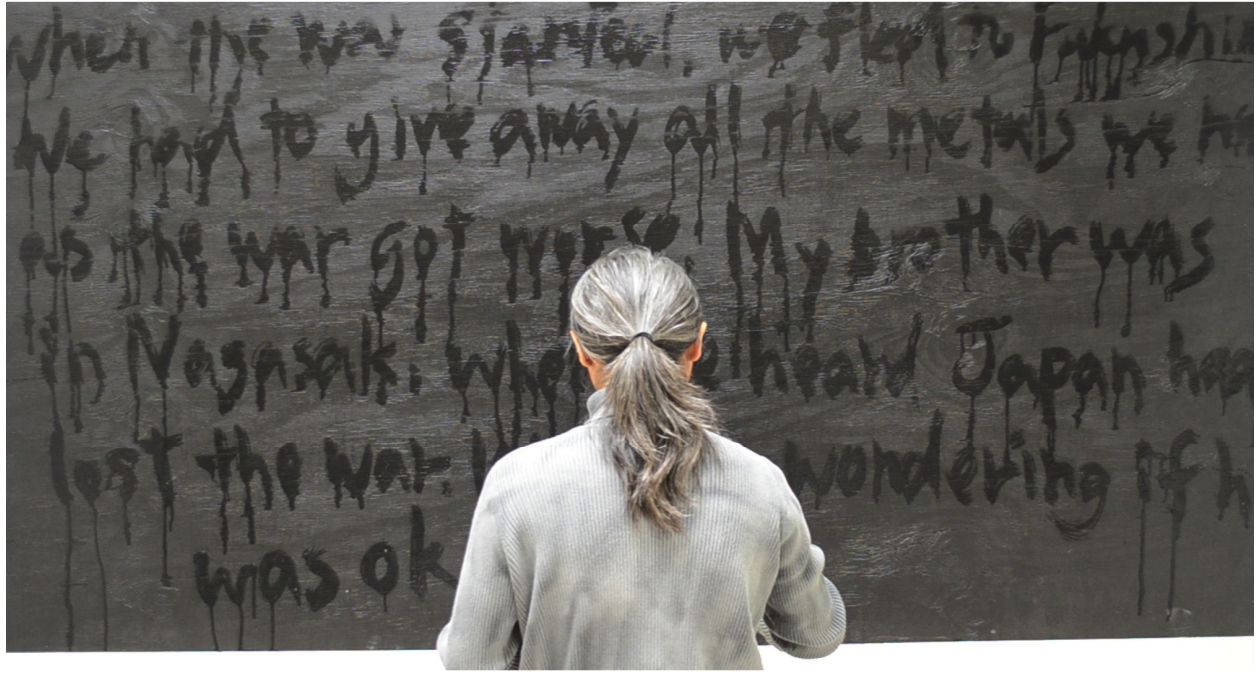
*30 Days of Barefoot* (Fig. 2.2) is one of my first works of art that incorporates a non-personal performative element, exploring how a repetitive physical gesture can affect a human body over time. I walked around downtown Atlanta for two to three hours barefoot every day for a month and took a picture of the soles of my feet. In the exhibition space, I present life-size

pictures of my feet chronologically from left to right so that the viewer can observe the month-long change, simultaneous deterioration and recovery. I did not necessarily force myself to walk as much as I could in one day or stop wearing shoes permanently and make this one an ongoing project since endurance and commitment were not my focal points. This piece is more about recording and showing my physical adaptation to a certain environment I was not accustomed to experiencing barefoot. Walking two to three hours every day for a month seemed a reasonable amount of time to observe simultaneous damage and recovery.

*Discursos por un mundo mejor* (Fig. 2.3), a piece I made while I was in Mexico City, speaks to economic and class issues of the city by utilizing the informal merchandising system in subway trains in order to insert an educational alternative. Among various forms of informal economy in Mexico City, I was intrigued by a group of people selling CDs in subway trains. They usually have a big speaker on their backs and play Latin Pop songs extremely loud to sell their CDs to people who happen to be in the same train. I was fascinated by the effectiveness of their marketing format and decided to make my own CDs with the ten different revolutionary and/or anti-capitalistic speeches of Latin America. After making fifty copies of the CD, I approached one of CD vendors to play my CD instead of theirs. The vendor kindly agreed to my offer and played mine for 30 minutes through his speaker. Although no one actually bought my CDs, the people in the train looked a bit confused and some of them were gazing at the vendor and me during the performance. Regardless of the piece's outcome, I inserted a didactic alternative to the existing consumer-driven structure.

*Mundane Affair*, *30 Days of Barefoot*, and *Discursos por un mundo mejor* I have mentioned above incorporate repetition and circulation as their formal elements to express parts of human nature. However, all of them have their own specificities in terms of imagery or

geographic location, and the actuality of repetition and circulation was secondary to their unique features. In my current practice, I decided to explore more the cyclical nature of our life by simplifying and abstracting moments of everyday events.



*Figure 2.1 Mundane Affair, 2013, performance*



*Figure 2.2 30 Days of Barefoot, 2013, inkjet print mounted on foam board, 10" x 22'*



*Figure 2.3 Discursos por un mundo mejor, 2014, performance, public intervention*

### 3 ON MAINTAINING CONTINUITY WITHOUT ACHIEVING SUBSTANTIAL GOALS

*“Here, in order to remain human, men must remain the same.” – Guy Debord<sup>2</sup>*

Performance and participation are the two major formal elements of my current practice. Although I started utilizing them into my work to criticize the societal structure we live in, performance and participation can be used as a means of depicting our adaptation to the structure. By incorporating performative and participatory elements with my conceptual

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<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), 130.

exploration, I represent the cyclical nature of experiencing excitement and futility in the structure of capitalism.

### 3.1 On Performance

Performance has been a major part of my artistic practice over the years. Although I have included performative elements to articulate my cultural identity and my physiological strength and vulnerability, now I am focusing on using performance to express temporality, objectivity, and everydayness.

My inclination towards the use of performance is due to its ephemerality and temporality that differentiate performance from object-based works of art. Peggy Phelan, a well-known scholar of feminism and performance studies, explains the nature of performance well by stating, “performance art is vulnerable to charges of valuelessness and emptiness. Performance indicates the possibility of revaluing that emptiness; this potential revaluation gives performance art its distinctive oppositional edge.”<sup>3</sup> To see a work of performance, the viewer has to be in the same space at the same time with the performer. Documentations of a performance such as images, video clips, or texts do not let the viewer obtain the same experience. This idiosyncratic formal quality of performance helps me to investigate ephemeral and temporal subjects such as excitement and futility.

In my performance, I try to focus on what is represented through my actual action not my physical characteristics. Even though I usually use my body for my performative pieces, I hardly bring my individual features such as gender, age or race into the discourse of my current practice. I am more interested in figuring out generic tendencies that all human beings share such

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<sup>3</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (London: Routledge, 1993), 148.



as how we react to or place ourselves within contemporary society by almost erasing my individuality. However, it is a futile attempt since my body is inevitably visible to the viewer and I cannot stop them from making references between my physical characteristics and what I try to represent through my actions. Vito Acconci discusses the struggle to make a performance piece with his inerasable body, “I should not be seen at all: it’s as if an action moves too quickly for an image to take place, have a place...If there has to be an image, it would be: not a picture made of an action (or of a person performing an action) but a picture made through an action (through person to action).”<sup>4</sup> Thus, I am in the middle of the unachievable mission, trying to express my dematerialized concept through my fully materialized body.

Another goal for my performance is to bring in mundaneness, away from theatricality. Performance art can be consumed as other types of object-based art forms such as painting, sculpture, photography, etc., and represented as a piece of the spectacle, a fictional action in a specific place at a specific time just for the spectator. In order to go against this spectacle nature of performance, I treat performance as equal to a regular job since it also involves physical labor and repetitive processes. I dress casually whenever I perform and engage in conversation if it seems appropriate. I also stop my action if I feel extremely tired and usually do not go over eight hours a day. I understand, with all these rules I developed, my performance is still vulnerable to becoming a piece of the spectacle since there is always the spectator of my performance that differentiates performance art from everyday life. However, no matter how hard and complicated it is, my intention is to insert everydayness into the realm of the spectacle and provide an opportunity to reevaluate the relationships between art and life.

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<sup>4</sup> Vito Acconci, “Steps into Performance (And Out),” in Kristine Stiles, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley, CA, London: University of California, 2010), 913.



Francis Alys, an internationally known artist who lives in Mexico City, also incorporates temporal, objective, and non-conventional natures of performance to articulate excitement and futility. By abstracting social and political issues to simple, enduring and repetitive performance-based gestures outside, Francis Alys expresses the futile and nonsensical nature of our lives. He explains his art making in a conversation with Carla Faesler, a poet based in Mexico City; “what I try to do is [to] introduce some poetic distance into those particular situations so [that] we can see them from the outside, from a new angle.”<sup>5</sup> In a video piece called *Rehearsal 1*, he drives a Volkswagen beetle up and down a hill in Tijuana, Mexico while he listens to a sound track of a brass band rehearsing. The beetle goes up the hill when the band starts to play and comes back down when the music stops. His action represents life as a perpetual rehearsal that takes us nowhere but continuously going up and down. This piece can also be taken as his criticism of the Mexican government that promises a lot to its citizens but does not deliver substantial solutions to existing problems in the country. Creating a simple and continuous gesture out of a particular situation in a particular place, Alys makes his work relatable for everyone by referring to the futile nature of our life and society.

### 3.2 On Participation

I have done several socially engaged art projects in the past couple of years that potentially provide positive impacts for humanity; however, I am now distancing myself from those projects in order to focus my concept on actualizing the cyclical nature of excitement and futility. In my current practice, I use participation as a means of enticing contemplation, the

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<sup>5</sup> Carla Faesler, “Francis Alys by Carla Faesler,” *BOMB Magazine 116 Summer 2011* (2011), accessed February 19, 2015, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/5109/francis-al-s>

complex nature of exciting human interaction and the use of free labor, and simultaneous criticism and approval of the capitalistic structure.

I consider participation as a means of instigating the act of looking. One of the most distinctive features of participatory art is to turn the viewer into a collaborator. I utilize this feature to subvert the viewer's expectation in the field of fine art where the act of looking is the overriding goal. Although it is true that the participant contemplates at some point during his or her engagement or after his participation, my attempt is to provide an alternative entry point to my concept. In other words, I use participation in the same way that I do for other media like paint, stone, wood, etc. to create an opportunity for contemplation for the viewer and the participant alike.

I am also interested in the participatory art's duality of creating simultaneous social interactions and exploitation of free labor. Since I use participation to create the viewer's potential contemplation, there is an aspect that I exploit free labor provided by the participant. Claire Bishop, an established critic on social practice since the 2000s, critiques audience participation in her 2011 lecture for Creative Time's *Living as Form* "as a story of their ever-increasing voluntary subordination to the artist's will, and of the commodification of human bodies in a service economy."<sup>6</sup> Even though the use of participation can be seen as a representation of capitalism, one cannot deny there is always a sense of emotional excitement in voluntary participation. When we see something that can make ourselves happy or satisfied, there is a moment of excitement. Voluntary participation takes place only when there is the possibility of satisfactory gain for the participant. No one would voluntarily participate in a work of art if it were harmful or uncomfortable. No matter how temporal the gain is, when it comes in

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<sup>6</sup> Claire Bishop, "Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?," Lecture, Creative Time's *Living as Form* from Cooper Union, New York, NY, May 18, 2011.

handy in relation to the compensation for the gain, the viewer of an artwork likely turns into the participant to enjoy momentary excitement and fulfillment. My use of participation not only critiques the futile structure of capitalistic society but also approves momentary excitement within the same structure.

Thomas Hirschhorn, a Swiss artist who champions depicting the complexity of participatory art, was a major influence for me to incorporate participatory elements into my current practice. Although he works in a similar ally to Alys by exploring the futile nature of our society, his practice, unlike Alys', is to work with a specific group of people in order to create a complicated event-like situation. In the summer of 2009, he organized a two-month long outdoor installation called *The Bijlmer Spinoza-Festival* in southeastern Amsterdam called the Bijlmer, a place known for its high immigrant population especially from Surinam. Hirschhorn, other organizers and local participants created a pop-up structure next to a running track where there were a stage for weekly plays and philosophy lectures, a library about Benedict Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a newspaper office where a daily paper was produced, etc.<sup>7</sup> Claire Bishop, who visited the actual installation and interviewed the local collaborators, describes, "The whole festival was more akin to a machine, whose meaning lay in its continual production and collective presence, and only secondarily in the content of what was being produced."<sup>8</sup> The project produced much-needed social interactions in the rapidly changing community; however, those interactions were created as consumable products as well as other commodities such as newspaper and play. Here, Hirschhorn's project becomes a locus for

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Bishop et al., *Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus*, (Bern: the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, Bern, with Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2011), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Claire Bishop et al., *Thomas Hirschhorn: Establishing a Critical Corpus*, 11.

providing social interactions and enforcing capitalistic structure at the same time in order to produce contemplation for the viewer.

### **3.3 On Affirmation of Futility, Reevaluation of Success and Failure, and Adaptation to Capitalism**

Both Alys' and Hirschhorn's works sarcastically embody the meaninglessness of our life and society by creating continuous repetitive systems that resemble what we are all a part of. However, I do not necessarily deny excitement through their works nor observe it as secondary to the futile nature of our life. The beetle going up and down the hill along with the music is comical and visually pleasing, and establishing social interactions in a community is genuinely exciting. It is almost like the both artists balance out futility and excitement in order to accept them equally. As I explained in the previous two sections, I also utilize performative and participatory components of my practice to represent temporal futility and excitement through the viewer's contemplation. And this balancing act, a perpetual search for equilibrium without achieving a substantial goal, is the basis of my current practice. That is an act of questioning the value of success and failure that are the essential materials of experiencing excitement and futility so that I can interpret the world I live in.

I acknowledge both excitement and futility as essential parts of life because experiencing both motivates me to achieve a next goal, no matter how subjective or temporal it is going to be. Life is exciting but also futile because nothing lasts forever. However, we can enjoy our life because we understand how valuable a moment of excitement is by accepting the temporal nature of life. However subjective and temporal that moment is, we can experience a sense of excitement. Sometimes we even appreciate having futility in life since we cannot value what

excitement is without the acknowledgement of futility; without the comparison, the binary does not exist. Thus, I value both of them equally since one cannot exist without the other.

In my practice, I also question the value of success and failure. Experiencing excitement and futility are the consequential products of achieving success and failure, which are formed by our subjective and temporal judgments. If I am reevaluating the experience of excitement and futility equally, I also have to do the same for success and failure since they are in a cause-effect relationship. They are two opposing categories, but I see any kind of success contains at least an element of failure, and vice versa. Any great invention has a room for improvement, and a catastrophic event causing many casualties can help people prevent a future incident of the same kind. The idea of success and failure is arbitrary, and my attempt to reevaluate those terms becomes a continuous balancing act of the two opposing entities without producing significant answers.

By affirming the futility of life and continuously balancing success and failure, my practice eventually becomes my own method of adaptation to our capitalistic society. In a capitalistic society where everything seems to be globalized, standardized, and commodified, living one's life does not look so different from living other people's lives. Of course, I am not saying that I am living the same life as you are, but there are many similarities in our lives due to the capitalistic structure. For example, one wakes up in his house as other people in his community do in their houses that are built in exactly the same way. He works in a cubicle as his other coworkers do and he sometimes grabs a coffee and cookies from the Starbucks downstairs. After he comes back home, he and his wife have food delivered from the newly opened Thai restaurant nearby. Then they watch a couple of shows on Netflix before going to bed. In the 1880's, Frederick Nietzsche had already figured out the futility of humanity and the world that

had become just a structure of continuous moving mass without any meaningful productions. He states in *The Will to Power*, “The world that concerns us is false; that is, it has no factual substance to it...it is ‘in flux,’ as something becoming, as a constantly sliding and shifting fabrication that never approaches the truth.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, my interpretation of this world or my current artistic practice becomes a continuous balancing act of success and failure in order to indicate simultaneous excitement and futility in the reified society.

#### 4 ON CURRENT WORKS

I differentiate my current works from my previous ones by making them more generic and objective so that the viewer can focus more on ephemeral subjects such as excitement and futility with the least amount of distraction. The use of performance and participation references our life and the labor we have to execute in order to live in the structure of capitalism. There are many elements of adjustment and compromise in my work in order to reflect our lives that we adjust ourselves to a certain environment and structure that we are a part of. I use conventional products that are widely available in huge franchises such as, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Target, etc. to have direct connections between my work and contemporary life. My practice has become nihilistic towards the structure of the capitalistic society; however, it still maintains the complex relationship between success and failure, which is generated by our perpetual balancing act of the binary in our everyday life.

In *Up and Down* (Fig. 4.1), I stack 2”x4”x6”wood blocks from the ground up to the highest point I can reach to the ground again continuously with the help of the audience. The higher the structure gets, the more precarious it becomes. I ask the viewer for help if they can

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<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, edit. and trans., Walter Kaufmann, trans., R. J. Hollingdale, *The Will to Power*, (New York: Random House, 1967), 366.

hold the structure so that I can keep building it without letting it collapse. When I reach the highest point I can, I gradually make the structure lower until I hit the ground again. Through this repetitive action with possible audience participation, I imply life in which there are ups and downs with or without the presence of others. Stacking wood blocks represents human daily activities and achievements that have their own dynamics and are affected by others' participation. Regardless of the audience participation, I keep building the structure, going up and down as life continues with or without the presence of others.

*Golden Ring* (Fig. 4.2) is an interactive installation. I draw an 18' diameter circle on the ground and have a 16" golden ring hanging down from the ceiling. There are piles of copy paper and instructions for paper airplanes around the circle on the ground. The viewer is invited to make their own paper airplanes and throw them through the ring. Those paper airplanes land on the floor whether they make it through the ring or not and become part of the installation. With this installation I intend the audience to experience a momentary achievement or failure by throwing paper airplanes through the golden ring. It is almost always the case that humans set another goal once they accomplish a certain thing. Thus, previous accomplishments get historicized, and a sense of achievement and failure becomes ephemeral. Piles of paper airplanes are not only the documentation of audience participation but also part of the installation that represents the ephemeral nature of human accomplishment.

In *Cactus and Balloons* (Fig. 4.3), I try to float a cactus in the air with balloons. It is difficult not to touch the balloons to the ceiling and the cactus to the ground. While I maintain its equilibrium by adding another balloon or spraying water onto the cactus, the viewer encounters my continuous struggle to balance the piece in the air. My intention here is to express the perpetual balancing that we have to undergo throughout our life. We humans have to take care of

ourselves endlessly to stay in the same mental and physical conditions however hard it is to maintain. The equilibrium of human life is hard to maintain because it is affected by our surrounded environments and ever-changing physical conditions. Likewise, the equilibrium of this piece is affected by room temperature, elevation, humidity, the quality of latex balloons, etc., and continuous watering and adding balloons are required to maintain the piece in the air. Life does not last very long just as there is a limit to how much helium you can get from one single tank, and also I can kill the cactus by overwatering it. However, because of all of these difficulties and struggles to achieve satisfactory moments, success becomes more valuable and there is a sense of excitement through the process.



*Figure 4.1 Up and Down, 2014, wood block, performance, participation, 3' x 10' x 7'*





*Figure 4.2 Golden Ring, 2014, wood, paper, chalk, paint, participation, 18' x 18' x 6'*



*Figure 4.3 Cactus and Balloons, 2014, cactus, balloon, helium, tape, performance, 3' x 3' x 5'*

## **5 CONCLUSION**

My interest in including performative and participatory elements in my practice allowed me to visualize conditional emotions such as excitement and futility that we experience on a daily basis. My use of everyday materials speaks to the disposability and replaceability of our consumer culture that is generated by a capitalistic society. I make my work to simultaneously critique and affirm capitalism, and I also imply our adaptation to its structure. By balancing the experience of excitement and futility, and reevaluating success and failure, I attempt to find the best way to live in the contemporary world.

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